

# The Controversy over the Basic Philosophical Disciplines of Metaphysics and Ontology

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## Abstract

The modern readings of the history of philosophy have led some scholars to attempt to reinvent or reconstruct the subject of metaphysics. These attempts had significant consequences on the Aristotelian model of metaphysics and its status as First Philosophy as listed by the ancient commentators, Alexander of Aphrodisias or Theophrastus. These new trends of philosophy also altered the dynamics of abstraction upon which Aristotle built a convincing theory of science according to the structures of discursive reasoning. The trend did not begin until after what historians termed the “second beginning of metaphysics in the thirteenth century.” The current paper investigates the historical development and controversy surrounding the understanding of the two philosophical terms and the consequences of replacing metaphysics with ontology as the First Philosophy.

## Keywords

Metaphysics, Ontology, First Philosophy, Being, Immanent, Transcendental, Cognition, Aristotle, Boethius

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## 1. Introduction

In his paper, Smith (2009) observed that in most minds, metaphysics is often described as the philosophical theory of anything that has to do with the after-life, the spiritual world, and anything else that exists outside of our physical reality (p. 432). Nietzsche (2009) openly ridiculed metaphysics as a doctrine that assumes the existence of a world behind or beyond the world we know and can know (p. 432). Similar ideas are also featured in the works of scholars like Bradley and Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant’s transcendental philosophy sought to draw a line between the legitimate (immanent) categories that define the ontological sphere of possible experience and the illegitimate (transcenden-

tal) conceptions of classical metaphysics. Worse still is the introduction of the word “Ontology” as the first philosophy in place of metaphysics and the attempt made by some writers to separate the two disciplines: the science of God and the study of being as being against the mindset of Aristotle in this discipline called metaphysics. Attempts also have been made by scholars of different disciplines to get rid of the term “metaphysics” and replace it with other words like “theodicy,” “dialectic,” and “logic.” Probably, these attempts were prompted by the reception of the entire *Corpus Aristotelicum* made possible by the Latin translations of Aristotle’s writings by prominent scholars, among which include the sixth-century Boethius, James of Venice, Burgundio of Pisa, and the resourceful William of Moerbeke, as well as the translations of the works and commentaries of the Arabic *Peripatetici*.

This discussion is important for various reasons. First, it is crucial to understand Western philosophy and demonstrate how the subject of metaphysics has changed within different historical periods. Today, various philosophical approaches have dismissed metaphysics as obsolete, and metaphysics faces negative criticism. The discipline once designated as basic science has now fallen so far out of approval that it rarely appears in curricula at most universities, including Catholic universities and seminaries. Against this neglect, [John Paul II \(2005\)](#) argued about the importance of metaphysics for the Christian culture and strongly emphasized that theology would be impoverished, if not impossible, without metaphysics (p. 77). The primary aim is to support theology, which depends on philosophy to interpret Revelation following the truth. Besides, the contemporary secular society, in her attempt to discredit Christianity, also has denied philosophy in its classical sense. The basic motive is to promote postmodernism.

In this paper, I will argue that metaphysics is the philosophical study of being as being whose subject matter is being and all that belongs to it essentially. I will pursue this issue by arguing against the conception that ontology is a distinct discipline different from the scope of metaphysics and, at the same time, the “first philosophy.” I will further give a little historical background to the origin of the problem and how the object of metaphysics has been defined in various currents of philosophy. Finally, I will argue that the use of the term “metaphysics” outside of the realm of realistic philosophy—which developed from Aristotle’s ideas, was completed by Aquinas, and is still practiced today under contemporary realistic philosophy will be a linguistic and cognitive error that will lead to misunderstanding and, ultimately, to the deformation of philosophy itself.

## 2. The Philosophical Project of Metaphysics and Ontology

Some thinkers have tried to define the philosophical project of metaphysics and ontology in the course of history. [Krapiec and Maryniarczyk \(2010\)](#), for example, define metaphysics as “a rationally grounded and intellectually verifiable

cognition of the really existing world (without excluding the Absolute Being from this affirmation), which cognition is directed to seek the ultimate reasons for the existence of the world, the traces of which the human reason discovers in the things that are given in empirical experience” (p. 77). In the classical philosophical tradition, the term “metaphysics” refers to a method of knowing in which reason uses universal principles of being and thought to seek out the first factors or causes that will render free of contradiction the cognition of that which exists and is given to us in a germinal way in the empirical intuition of the material world (Krapiec & Maryniarczyk, 2010: p. 89). It is the appeal of the basic power of the cognitive faculty called “intellectual intuition” to the ultimate causes of what is or being to reach a full grasp of complexity in the whole and plurality in unity. It goes from the data of common-sense cognition upon which all the sciences, both the particular and the philosophical science, to scientific refinements of precision and rational justifications. Andronicus of Rhodes coined the term “metaphysics” as a designation that served more as a librarian’s identifying mark than as a subject matter (around 50 BC). This description was intended to indicate the works that follow the physical writings. The word metaphysics is synonymous with philosophy so long as philosophy investigates the real existing world: plants, animals, people, and things.

As observed by Loux (2006), Aristotle was not definite regarding the subject of this study, although his claims mainly aimed to achieve knowledge of the first causes. Here, the central focus of the study is God or the Unmoved Mover, among other studies. To avoid metaphysics being described as the science of God or investigation of first causes, Aristotle further describes it as the science that studies being as being. It is a universal science that considers all the objects that exist. Metaphysics investigates the components that make up the subject matter for the other disciplines in this approach (pp. 2-5). Scholars maintained this dual characterization of metaphysics up to the medieval period. They were convinced that the two ideas of metaphysics are realized in a single discipline. Hence, metaphysics attempts to establish the existence and nature of the divine substance and define the categorical structure of reality. For example, Aquinas divided *sapientia* (knowledge) into *metaphysica* (being as being), *prima philosophia* (first principles), and *theologia* (Simon, 1995: p. 312). This structure remained intact until the arrival of Continental rationalists like Christian Wolff, Kant, and many others in the early modern period.

The term “ontology” takes its root meaning explicitly from the Greek term for “being.” It comes from *onto* (being, what is) and *logos* which means the logic behind being or the discourse about being. It could be translated as “the study of being/what there is.” Jacob Lorhard (Lorhardus), a German philosopher, coined this term *ontologia* in 1606 and used it for the first time in his book *Ogdoas Scholastica* (First edition). Christian Wolff, a German rationalist philosopher, popularised it in his Latin publications, particularly in *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia* (1730), which translates as “First Philosophy or Ontology,” and eventually gained wide acceptance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ed-

mund Husserl, the German phenomenologist, adopted this term and referred to Wolff's ontology or general metaphysics as "formal ontology." In general, ontology is a philosophical discipline that studies the most general philosophical notions like being, essence, existence, object, properties, necessity, and possibility. The current literature of scholars like Husserl, Ingarden, Meixner and Armstrong echoes further insight into the primary focus of ontological study and its distinction from the philosophical project of metaphysics. For Ingarden, ontology is distinct from metaphysics. While Meixner (2004) has argued that ontology investigates the structure of reality by examining language (p. 11), Husserl (1913), Ingarden's teacher, believes that ontology focuses on the relationships between things, including those between parts and wholes, objects, and properties. On the contrary, Ingarden and Armstrong's ontology describes not the structure of our thought about reality but the structure of reality itself. For Ingarden (1965), ontology investigates the structures of things independently of how (and whether) we refer to them, describe them, or think of them; that is how they are independent of anything mental, not how they are represented (p. 62). Scholars like Strawson have gone as far as distinguishing between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics. For Strawson (1959), descriptive metaphysics investigates the actual structure of our thought about the world, while revisionary metaphysics aims to create a better structure (p. 9). They are rather described as conceptual or descriptive metaphysics and metaphysical ontology. Revisionary metaphysics is a common term used among many ontologists to describe studies like Ingarden and Armstrong's ontology, which attempts to explore things as they are rather than our conceptual scheme.

Ingarden (1964) claims that ontology, unlike metaphysics, is concerned not with what actually exists but with "pure possibilities and necessities" (p. 29). Formal ontology is a branch of ontology that studies what it means to be an idea, a substance, a property, a state of affairs, etc. It aims to figure out these things' structures and analyze their forms. Ontology uses the method of *a priori* to analyze the content of ideas. In this case, these ideas are non-temporal and mind-independent entities. Hence, they are neither concepts nor meanings (Ingarden, 1964). Therefore, ontological discoveries can only be achieved by intuition. This does not mean that truths about the world cannot be discovered without experience. In the phenomenological tradition, *a priori* knowledge was based on a specific kind of phenomenological experience rather than being entirely independent of experience (as logical empiricists understood "a priori") (Ingarden, 1964; Scheler, 1980). On the other hand, metaphysics seeks to investigate what is, that is, what really exists. Its inquiries embrace the study of substances, the different types of substances like simple and compound substances, whether things are themselves substances or the elementary particles of which they consist could be termed their basic substances (Wachter, 2005). For Ingarden, substances are the things we see with our eyes. They are composed of matter and form. Ingarden calls them original ("ursprunglich"), individual ("individuell"), self-sufficient ("seinsselbständig"), autonomous ("seinsautonom"), temporal

(“zeitbestimmt”) objects. Most times, he simply calls them ‘individual objects. Metaphysics’ examination further includes the inquiry about the existence of God and whether a particular property of a thing is part of its (individual) essence. Ingarden believes that ontology deals with the content or form of thoughts or ideas, whereas metaphysics deals with what actually exists. Results from ontology are important for metaphysics to define ideas or concepts by first finding out what kind of thing they are and finally, analyzing their corresponding ideas to show that things of that kind are what they are. The latter part of the investigation is majorly the task of ontology (Ingarden, 1925, 1964). Be that as it may, the distinction of ontological and metaphysical projects defined by these ontologists is yet to be embraced by metaphysics scholars who claim that metaphysics is all embracing and maintains its dual characterization.

### 3. Boethius and the Introduction of Metaphysics in the Latin West

As stated earlier, the reconstruction of the subject matter of metaphysics did not begin until after the reception of the entire *Corpus Aristotelicum* made possible by the Latin translations of Aristotle’s writings by prominent scholars among which include the sixth-century Boethius, James of Venice, Burgundio of Pisa, and the resourceful William of Moerbeke, as well as the translations of the works and commentaries of the Arabic *Peripatetici*. When one considers the history of metaphysics in the Latin West, there is at least one important forerunner, Boethius, who provided the Latin-speaking community with its only Latin translations of Aristotelian writings, namely the *Organon* except for the *Posterior Analytics*, up until the middle of the twelfth century. Boethius demonstrates the division of the three theoretical disciplines according to Book E of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* in his “theological treatises”, particularly in the second chapter of his *Liber quomodo Trinitas unus Deus ac non tres Dii* (or *De Sancta Trinitate*) (Moreschini, 2000). This *divisio philosophiae* became a point of reference for the epistemological enterprise in the twelfth century, particularly in the “Chartrian” and “Porretanean” schools, to establish a *scientia naturalis* based solely on reason and argument and to establish theology as a deductive science, which proceeds more geometrical in a strong axiomatical order and provides the highest and most common principles (maximae or rationes communes) for the other sciences. It is no surprise that Chenu (1976) spoke of the twelfth-century tradition as an *Aetas Boetiana* (pp. 142-158).

This concept derives from Aristotle’s division of the three speculative sciences into motion and abstraction or separation. Physics deals with motion and is not abstract or separable. Mathematics does not deal with motion and is not abstract. On the other hand, theology does not deal with motion and is abstract and separable. As a result, physics is concerned with the forms of bodies that are joined together with their constituent matter. Mathematics concerns the forms of bodies separate from matter, though those forms connected with matter cannot truly be separated from bodies. Only theology is concerned with an object

devoid of matter and motion, namely the divine substance (Boethius, 1968). The same Aristotelian metaphysics translated and transmitted by Boethius is further witnessed in Aquinas, who composed the only thirteenth-century commentaries on two of Boethius' theological treatises, *De Trinitate* and *De Hebdomadibus* (Aquinas, 1992). For McInerney (1990), "Boethius taught what Thomas said he taught." He concludes that "the Thomistic commentaries of Boethius are without question the best commentaries ever written on the tractates" (p. xiv).

Boethius (1968) believes that another theological or philosophical discipline based on biblical exegesis distinct from the Aristotelian epistemological methodology laid out in *Metaphysics* A and E has no place. He recognized Aristotle's metaphysics and applied it to the Christian faith's mysteries, particularly the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, which were the cognitive content of this theological science. Besides, he believes that natural reasoning discovers the proper object of theology, the divine essence, and its ultimate manifestation in the threefold predication of divinity. Reason also can find the correct theological language. In all of Boethius' analyses and applications of Aristotle's metaphysics to the Christian faith's doctrines, there is no such distinction in the scope of his metaphysics as claimed in the writings of some continental rationalists. As such, metaphysics is the philosophical study of being as being whose subject matter is being and all that belongs to it essentially.

#### 4. What Does "Being as Being" Mean?

To say that metaphysics studies being as being refers to a study that embraces the real world, namely, what is universally called reality; a study that concerns itself with reality as a whole, that is, it concerns everything that exists; and finally, a study that apprehends neutrally; specifically, not implying definite solutions to questions, and not setting thought on a predetermined track of reasoning, but making possible constant contact with reality and allowing the objective philosophical interpretation of reality. The study embraces reality, universality, and neutrality based on primary cognitive acts which condition the cognitive relation of the knower with the cognized reality. In more recent approaches to metaphysical realism, such kind of cognition has been identified as metaphysical separation built on existential judgments (Krapiec & Maryniarczyk, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Duma (2021) explains that the application of separation for determining the object of metaphysical cognition is the first and most crucial step in metaphysics. He argues that using the separation approach is necessary for preserving features such as realism, transcendentalism, analogism, and directness in this sort of cognition. The proper object of philosophy as provided in the traditional formula "being as being" is simply understood and interpreted as "being as existing being" because only real (actual) existence constitutes reality. Stated otherwise, metaphysics deals with the cognitive apprehension of what really exists. Being in

<sup>1</sup>Existential judgement is identifying or singling out the proper object and the specific type of metaphysical cognition that ensures the cognition of existing things is grounded in reality.

metaphysics refers to a thing's material or immaterial existence. It is everything that exists. Being as a concept refers to objective and subjective aspects of reality and existence. Metaphysics concentrates majorly and provides a foundation for the most fundamental concepts of reality like being, substance, truth, man, the soul, property, causality, relation, existence, purpose, the good, the first principles of being, generation and corruption, universals, space, time, event, and cognition.

The notion of being traces back from the end of the sixth century to the second half of the fourth century BC, when Greek philosophers discussed and came up with a series of philosophical theories. The beingness of a thing was designated by Heraclitus and the scholars who supported his thought as the law of change itself (*logos*). The changing law constitutes the universe's act of being. Others, such as Parmenides, held that an absolutely unchanging and self-identical element determines the reality of being. Parmenides insists on drawing the difference between being and non-being: "what is is, and what is not is not." Hence, what is or being is ungenerated, continuous, imperishable, and unchanging. Throughout history, many thinkers have identified Parmenides' unchanging element that constituted reality in various aspects of reality. For Pythagoreans, it is a number; Plato identifies it as a self-identical idea separate from the world of shadows. Plato's forms or ideas, the object of knowledge and philosophical inquiry is the being that really is (Plato, *Phaedrus* 247c7) and the being which has the domination of "what is" (Plato, *Phaedo* 93d8-9). For Plato (1989), the object of knowledge is that which is, while the object of opinion is that which is and is not. Being is that which purely is, and opinion is that which in no way is. Aristotle (1984) sees being, the unchanging element that constitutes reality, in the form of the thing that comprises it in the aspect of unity, capacity to be known, and beingness. He chooses the term "being" (*ousia*) for the designation of his key concept, substance. For Plotinus, being is constituted by an ecstatic good that overflows by necessity according to a necessary hierarchy and which constitutes reality; for Stoics, in the "*natura naturans*", that is, the soul of the universe, a soul just as material as the entire universe. In this current, the bid to explain reality gave rise to unique interpretations of being as: 1) absolute potentiality, 2) absolute unity or invariance (being as being), 3) number, 4) a concept, 5) a form, and 6) the ecstatic good. However, Parmenides' formulated "being as being" as the definition of the object of philosophical inquiries has remained in use to date.

## 5. The Historical Problem

The history of philosophy has revealed the different historical backgrounds and stages of development of the term "metaphysics" as well as being able to distinguish it from ontology. The word "metaphysics" appeared as early as the first century, while "ontology," established in philosophical discourses, appeared in the seventeenth century. Interestingly, the terms "metaphysics" and "ontology"

came to be used interchangeably. Only in the twentieth century did the philosophical debates focus on the distinction of the subjects and approaches of the terms in philosophy. These discussions were necessitated by some apparent factors, including that some scholars came to appreciate ontology as the “first philosophy” and most important area of philosophy by making moves to deconstruct metaphysics’ subject or even erase it from history. Metaphysics as a discipline has also been criticized as being outdated by various philosophical systems. Through their writings, the Continental rationalists expanded the scope of the metaphysical enterprise. What was designed to be a single discipline with a particular subject matter became a study of disparate subjects. Because of the sensitivity of such a claim, Rationalists tried in various writings to justify their division of the disciplinary borders within philosophy. What finally emerged was the claim that metaphysics has only one subject matter: being. Therefore, the metaphysician strives to explain the nature of being. There are several ways from which to present such an idea. Corresponding to these different perspectives are different sub-disciplines within metaphysics. For example, Christian Wolff, who substituted the medieval scheme, split metaphysics into general and specific metaphysics. He referred to general metaphysics as “ontology,” or the science of being as being. Special metaphysics was divided into three branches. These branches are rational theology, rational psychology, and rational cosmology. They are the sciences of God, souls, and bodies. Around the eighteenth century, Wolff introduced the term “ontologia” to replace the word “metaphysics.” Apart from its use by Jacob Lorhard in 1606, the word “ontology” also had formerly appeared in the works of R. Goclenius and J. Clauberg in the seventeenth century.

The change in name from “first philosophy” to “ontology” led to the change of method. Hence, Wolff gave up the autonomous method that the first philosophy or metaphysics had used for a more scientific approach. This scientific method Wolff took from Descartes. This method would consist in transferring methods (*methodo scientifica pertractata*) that the first philosophy or ontology would use. Similarly, Kant’s metaphysics of nature was divided into general metaphysics, known as ontology and physiology of reason. The physiology of reason was subdivided into two transcendent parts and two immanent parts. The two transcendent parts are rational theology and rational cosmology while the immanent parts are rational psychology and rational physics. Meanwhile, Husserl named the study of being “ontology” but divided it into formal ontology and ontologies. Ingarden split ontology into three: existential, formal, and material. Existential ontology investigates moments of existence that are combined into modes of being, such as forms of dependency, modality, and temporality. Formal ontology examines objects in terms of their form, i.e., property, thing, event, relation, process, system, and situation. On the other hand, material ontology studies objects in respect of their kind, that is, divine, psychological, and spatio-temporal. Ingarden sees metaphysics as the actual ontology among all possi-



ble ontologies.

Despite efforts to maintain the integral character of metaphysics, Lutheran writers increasingly regarded an independent natural theology as necessary. They made a distinction between classical metaphysics and *pneumatologia* (pneumatology). Classical or traditional metaphysics aims to explain certain universally valid concepts and ideas, while pneumatology deals with the nature, attributes, and activities of spiritual beings. By publishing a separate textbook on *Theologia Naturalis*, Christopher Scheibler contributed to the division of the two subjects in 1621. The publication of Jacopo Zabarella's *Opera Logica* in Basle in 1594 was also crucial to this progression. Calvinist authors attempted to make a clear distinction between two sciences: a science of God to the extent that human reason could contemplate God and a science of being viewed as a universal science that provides the principles for all the particular sciences (Lohr, 1988). In the prologue to his *Isagoge in primam philosophiam*, Marburg professor Goclenius (1988) spoke of two different sciences: a general science called "first philosophy" and a specific science named "metaphysics." The first branch of philosophy is concerned with being, its attributes, and principles. Metaphysics studies the various types of immaterial beings: God, intelligence, and the human soul (pp. 169-170). The above historical excursus demonstrates briefly how the scope of metaphysics was expanded against its historical background and origin. Beyond expanding the scope of metaphysics was also the attempt to divide the dual characterization of metaphysics as the study of the first cause and the science of being as being.

## 6. The Implications of These Changes

It would be simplistic to identify metaphysics only with transcendence. The primary focus of metaphysics instead is the relation between essence and existence and the universal and particular. The implication of identifying metaphysics only with the transcendence is to change completely the object of metaphysics which is the material world, and more importantly, the subject matter of metaphysics, which is being as being and all that belongs to it in an essential way. By replacing the term "metaphysics" with "ontology," metaphysics will automatically be removed from the domains of philosophical disciplines that investigate really existing things. With these changes, metaphysics can no longer be a tool to physics as in the mind of Aristotle, and as to the reason why Andronicus of Rhodes placed it after the study of physics to assist in answering such questions about what substance is, the principle of non-contradiction, unity, causes, ideas.

Furthermore, metaphysics as a separate discipline from ontology as the science of God would lose its credibility as the "first philosophy" that views things as beings or existents and strives to specify the properties or features they exhibit only inasmuch as they are beings or existents. Besides, the Aristotelian vision of metaphysics as a completely universal science that investigates being as

being and as a discipline concerned with first causes would be muddled and contradicted by this ontological shift. The argument that cosmology and rational psychology are branches of metaphysics expresses metaphysics' new and greater scope in the rationalist framework. Even Wolff and other Continental rationalists who claimed that metaphysics could be separated into general and specific metaphysics and called general metaphysics (the science of being as being) ontology and special metaphysics as the rational sciences of God, souls, and bodies, respectively, make it difficult to replace the name "metaphysics" with "ontology" as ontology is only a part of metaphysics or perhaps an entirely different science from metaphysics as claimed by the Calvinist philosophers. Finally, with the change in name from "first philosophy" to "ontology," there will be a change of method in the study of metaphysics, and metaphysics will be transferred to different philosophical traditions like Cartesianism and Kantianism.

## 7. Conclusion

The controversy about understanding the basic philosophical discipline has created the impression of two ways of doing metaphysics, especially after Kant. It is either by returning to the traditional metaphysics or by making a serious effort to develop and adhere to the post-Kantian metaphysics. Most subsequent metaphysics in the European tradition followed Kant. It took Kant's critique as a standard, which later gave rise to the term "ontology." However, from the above historical inquiry, the paper reveals a dilemmic distinction between the two terms as the scope of metaphysics shows to be dynamic. The uniqueness of metaphysics lies in its dual characterization that is realized in a single discipline: one that aims both to delineate the categorical structure of reality and the other to prove the divine substance's existence and nature; that is, the science of the first cause and being as being. No wonder Boethius thinks that another theological or philosophical discipline based on intellectual cognition distinct from the Aristotelian epistemological methodology laid out in *Metaphysics* A and E has no place. Metaphysics' "being as being" incorporates reality, universality, and neutrality of human cognition and is founded on proper cognitive methods and acts known as metaphysical separation and existential judgments. It has as an object everything that exists. Therefore, it would somewhat be justified, so to speak, to regard ontology as a branch of metaphysics than the claim that ontology is a distinct discipline different from metaphysics or the attempt to dismiss or get rid of the term "metaphysics." As I am obviously to conclude from these considerations, to use the term "metaphysics" outside of the realm of realistic philosophy—which developed from Aristotle's ideas, and is still practiced today in the framework of contemporary realistic philosophy will undoubtedly be a linguistic and cognitive error which will lead to misunderstanding and, ultimately, to the deformation of philosophy itself.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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